

MINUTES OF THE HEARING OF THE NEW YORK STATE FACTORY INVESTIGATING COMMISSION, HELD IN THE CITY HALL AT 10:30 A.M.

NEW YORK, October 10, 1911

MR. ELKUS: With your permission, Mr. Chairman, we will call Mr. Croker as the first witness. EDWARD F. CROKER, called as a witness, being first duly sworn, testifies as follows:

Direct examination by Mr. ELKUS:

Q. Chief, will you tell the Commissioners just how long you have been in the Fire Department, what positions you have held, etc., so that we may have it upon the record?

A. I was appointed fireman June 22nd, 1884, and went through the various grades of the department from time to time, until I arrived at the position of Chief of the department; I served in that capacity for twelve years and retired May first of the present year.

Q. During that time, did you make any study of the conditions of manufacturing in New York City, from a fireman's standpoint?

A. Yes.

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Q. Tell us about the fire-escapes - of the things you have seen?

A. Very few of the factories have outside fire-escapes; very few; they have very few outside fire-escapes, and where they have them they are inadequate. They use the stairways. They call those things the fire-escapes; they also use the elevators, and they call them fire-escapes. An elevator in a building is generally a fire shaft.

Q. Do you mean to say that under the law they can permit an elevator to be called a fire-escape?

A. They don't permit it to be called a fire-escape, but they use it as such and mark it as such.

Q. Aren't they required in a ten-story loft building to have exterior fire-escapes?

A. It lies within the discretion of the Superintendent of Buildings - that is, in what they call a fireproof building.

Q. In other words, if a building is fireproof, the Superintendent may not require them to have exterior fire-escapes; and in that case they are allowed to use the elevators and stairs?

A. Elevator and stairs.

Q. In these various buildings where there are exterior fire-escapes built, access is had to them from the window?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. What has been your experience, Chief, with reference to the use of these fire-escapes in case of fire? Are they used at all?

A. A great many will use them, but they are not used to advantage. Women, and especially children - girls, such as work in these buildings, cannot descend them.

Q. They cannot get down on them?

A. Not readily.

Q. Is it your idea if they are to continue, they should be made with a regular staircase?

A. With regular staircase, and made to extend away from the building - not close to the building.

Q. Is there any other suggestion that you have to give the Commission as to the use of fire-escapes?

A. There have been some cases where fire-escapes, by being very crowded, have pulled away from the building. Fire-escape should be built into the building by having the floor beams extend out to the proper width.

Q. That would be very inexpensive?

A. Yes, make a very good fire-escape.

Q. And that should be made compulsory; is that your view?

A. In all these cases, it should be mandatory. I find in my experience in and around these buildings, that a great majority of the people who occupy the various establishments would rather take a chance on the loss of life than spend five or ten dollars to prevent it.

Q. Now, Chief, about the occupation of these buildings. In your experience in fighting fires, what have you found to be the condition of these buildings so far as their occupation is

concerned - material and machinery on the floors - just tell the Commission what your experience has been.

A. Some buildings you go into are kept nicely, but the majority of others you go in are unkempt; they are dirty; they are unclean; their stock is strewn all over the floor. Where they use machinery there are no passageways whatsoever. In a great many cases there is only about one door on that loft you can get in. Goods are piled up in front of the windows, in front of the doors, and you have got to use a battering ram to get into any of them.

Q. How about the passageways being blocked?

A. Piled right to the ceiling. Many a time the firemen get into places in the night time and there is no room for a man to go through the passages.

Q. How about the passageway to a fire-escape? Do you find those blocked or open? A. Find them blocked.

Q. How about locked doors to the staircases? Have you found that?

A. Oh, yes, plenty of them. The doors going to the roof are locked. They pay absolutely no attention to the fire hazard or to the protection of the employees in these buildings. That is their last consideration.

Q. What do you suggest should be done with reference to these locked doors, and things like that?

A. There should be mandatory legislation to compel them to keep the doors unlocked during working hours. All doors should be opened up. Aisles should be kept clear, obstructions should be moved away from doorways, and windows and so forth; and in case of any violations of such a law there should be a severe penalty attached to it.

Q. Imprisonment or fine?

A. You can't make it too heavy. You have got a class of people doing business constantly, not only in New York City, with whom you've got to deal severely, and give them to understand that there is the law, and they have got to obey it, for the protection of property and the people that they employ. If you don't have drastic legislation you can't get anything from them.

Q. Well, do you believe that there would be less loss of life if those rules were followed?

A. I do, sir.

Q. Were you present at the fire of the Triangle Waist Company building?

A. I was, sir.

Q. And you made a careful investigation of that fire, did you not?

A. Yes, sir, I did.

Q. The Building Department is responsible that the building is safe?

A. The fault in New York City is that there is nobody responsible for anything. The Fire Department is not responsible; the Building Department is not responsible; the Police Department is not responsible; the Health Department is not responsible. If anything happens they are all stepping from under.

Q. In other words, when anything happens, each one blames it on the other department, and it would be your idea, and your recommendation to the Commission, that the responsibility should be fixed upon some one particular head of some one department?

A. Yes.

Q. And at the same time give him the corresponding power?

A. The Asch Building fire started with the Fire Department. The Fire Department says, "Our records are all right; everything we ordered was complied with." The Building Department says, "Our records are all right." The Health Department says, "Our records are all right." The Police Department have not got through investigating yet, and I don't think they ever will and nobody is responsible. There are just as many factories in New York in the same condition as the Asch Building was and probably is today.

http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/texts/reports/nyfic_1912_p14.html